

**Testimony of Mr. Richard Lauber, Chairman  
North Pacific Fishery Management Council  
before the  
Senate Subcommittee on Oceans and Fisheries  
January 18, 2000**

Good morning, Senators. Thank you for inviting me to speak. It's a good time to take stock of how we're doing in fisheries management. We've all heard that fisheries are doing poorly around the nation and the world. For the most part, resource managers have not received very good marks. But from my experience as Council Chairman for almost 10 years, and many more years in Alaska fisheries, I believe that we have sustainable fisheries management up here.

The Magnuson-Stevens Act provides a very sound foundation for sustainable management. To make it work, however, requires a considerable dose of political will to restrain the fishery so the fish can flourish, but still keep industry viable. We've achieved a balance that maintains Alaska as the U.S. leader in fisheries production: Over 50% of the nation's landings come from here.

We have limited entry into our fisheries and have initiated the largest IFQ experiment (for our sablefish and halibut fisheries) in the U.S. We allocate many species by sector, and tightly control bycatch and waste of non-target species. I am proud that our industry has been willing to shoulder the costs of this highly regulated regime, as well as an expensive observer program, to ensure long term sustainability of the resource.

When I appeared before the Senate Subcommittee last July, I summarized our progress on implementing the Sustainable Fisheries Act and submitted extensive documentation on our actions. Today, I want to focus briefly on several key issues before us.

**Steller sea lion protection** has required much of our time since late 1998 when NMFS published its Biological Opinion concluding jeopardy from our pollock fisheries. Last year alone, fully 20% of our Council meeting time was spent on sea lion protective measures. We responded directly to advice from NMFS in approving many restrictive measures that will place a severe economic burden on local fishermen. We need more research and experiments carried out to help us learn more about the impacts of fishing and adaptive management. We hope our actions will help sea lions rebound.

The **American Fisheries Act** was a groundbreaking piece of legislation. It has consumed roughly 35% of our Council meeting time and 30% of our staff time. We are very grateful for the additional funds sent our way to defray costs of AFA activities. I sense that in the long run, we will conclude that the AFA provided a very innovative approach to addressing overcapacity in the pollock fisheries, and its use of cooperatives may provide a good template for other fisheries as well. For 2000, the offshore and inshore cooperatives will be up and running, and we have appropriate sideboards in place to limit their impacts on non-AFA fisheries. Groundfish processor sideboard caps and excessive shares are up for final action in April. Other fisheries such as Gulf of Alaska pollock and Bering Sea crab are considering the use of cooperatives. We will submit a performance report to you in October.

**Restricting halibut charterboats** is a big issue we will address in February. We are considering guideline harvest levels, not to close the charterboat fishery in-season, but to trigger future fishing constraints to keep the overall harvest within the GHL range. They will apply only to the charter fleet, but I am sure you will hear from unguided sport fishermen as well, and the commercial fleet, no matter what we do. This is our Council's first big foray into the classic commercial-recreational struggle that has played out for years elsewhere in the nation, and we know its not going to be an easy decision.

**Overfishing definitions** may be considered in the coming reauthorization. I noted earlier that we have generally robust groundfish stocks. We also realize that individual stocks can fluctuate widely over time. Somehow we must balance the need for protective overfishing measures with these natural changes in abundance. Let's be precautionary in our management, especially when a stock is low, but reasonable in our approach, and not necessarily shut everything down, as some would have us do.

**Essential fish habitat** descriptions have been added to our fishery plans and we have imposed measures to minimize fishing impacts on habitat. These include bans on bottomfishing on a unique pinnacle area off Sitka and on bottom trawling for Bering Sea pollock. Additionally, we've closed about 30,000 square nautical miles in the Bering Sea to all trawling, an area larger than Maine and more than twice the size of Georges Bank. The Gulf of Alaska has closures as well. I believe Congress should take a hard look at our habitat requirements and be more specific about defining "essential" fish habitat. Lets protect the habitat that really counts. The broader perspective in current legislation and NMFS guidelines just opens the door wide to the types of lawsuits being filed now.

**Subsistence management** came under the spotlight this past year when it was turned over to the Federal Government. We are involved mainly with halibut on the Bering Sea coast, but may become more involved as subsistence management evolves.

**Russian fisheries** impact on our pollock stocks is the last issue I want to touch on. Viability of our pollock resource may hinge to some extent on how much is harvested in Russian waters. U.S. stocks mix with Russian pollock off Cape Navarin, and they also are hit hard along our maritime boundary in the northern Bering Sea. We can expect even more intense pressure along the boundary because their stocks are declining, a situation further aggravated by the Russian State Committee on Fisheries licensing vessels from five to six countries to fish pollock for hefty fees, and recent reports of factory trawlers moving from Murmansk to the Far East. We appreciate your support for scientific exchanges of information and increased patrol activities of the Coast Guard out along the boundary and the Donut Hole. This problem needs our continued attention and resolution.

In closing, thank you for holding this hearing here in Alaska. My extended remarks are attached. I look forward to working with you on forthcoming changes to the Magnuson-Stevens Act.